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ABSTRACT

Noting the disconnect between what is known about the crucial role that transition plays in ensuring educational continuity and what is currently available in schools, the Harvard Family Research Project conducted a review of current research on the transition to kindergarten, focusing on promising transition practices and the role that schools might play in their implementation. This brief offers a synthesis of those findings, focusing on the important role that families play in transition to kindergarten. The brief begins with an overview of the concept of transition and its importance to school success. The brief then examines transition practices that focus on families, considering both practices and key players in implementation; included are examples of promising transition practices that involve families. The brief concludes with the presentation of a framework for the development of school and program transition teams that value family involvement. (Contains 17 references.) (EV)

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Harvard Family Research Project

The Transition to Kindergarten: A Review of Current Research and Promising Practices to Involve Families

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Introduction

In 1998 the National Education Goals Panel set forth the goal that by the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn. It then outlined 10 keys to "ready schools" including:

- Ready schools strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary schools
- Ready schools smooth the transition from home to school (Shore, 1998)

Despite their belief that transition is a key component of school readiness, the Panel goes on to state that "transition activities ... are the exception rather than the rule in our public schools" (p. 7). Cognizant of this disconnect between what we know about the crucial role that transition plays in ensuring continuity and what is currently available in our schools, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) conducted a review of current research on the transition to kindergarten, focusing on promising transition practices and the role that schools might play in their implementation. This brief offers a synthesis of our findings, focusing on the important role that families play in transition to kindergarten.[1]

The brief begins with an overview of the concept of transition and its importance to school success. It then examines transition practices that focus on families, considering both practices and key players in implementation; it includes examples of promising transition practices that involve families. It concludes with the presentation of a framework for the development of school and program transition teams that value family involvement.

An Overview of the Concept of Transition

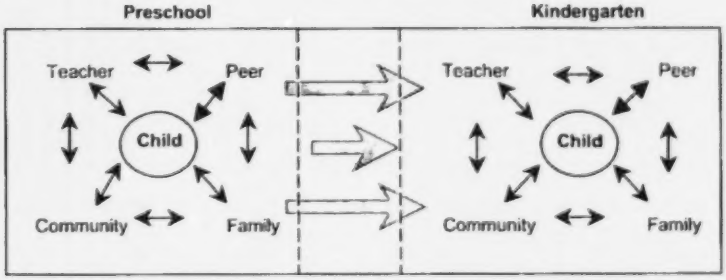
In the literature, the concept of transition is tied closely to the concept of "readiness" (Meisels, 1999; Pianta, Rimm-Kauffman, & Cox, 1999). Ensuring that children start school ready to learn requires that attention be paid to one of the most complex and significant changes they will experience—transition to kindergarten. Increasingly, however, the traditional construct of school readiness is being criticized for its disproportionate focus on a child's skill alone (Ramey & Ramey, 1999). Much of the research on school readiness has not recognized the contextual factors that impact this *multi-year* period of time for a child. A transition to school framework that incorporates these contextual factors is now viewed as a more accurate portrayal of how children become ready to learn. Such a framework acknowledges not only the importance of a child's skill, but also how important "ready" schools and "ready" communities are to the transition process.

[1] Information for this brief was compiled through December 2000.

Kagan and Neuman (1998) suggest that numerous interpretations can be included in what is defined as transition. To some, transitions reflect a one-time set of activities undertaken by programs, families, and children at the end of the year (e.g., a visit by parent and child to the next setting). To others, transitions reflect ongoing efforts to link children's natural environments (e.g., as their family) to support environments (e.g., programs). Lastly, to some, transition is "the manifestation of the developmental principles of continuity, that is, creating pedagogical, curricular, and/or disciplinary approaches that transcend, and continue between, programs" (Kagan & Neuman, 1998, p. 1).

Whatever the focus of a particular transition effort, transition to kindergarten "should be understood in terms of the influence of contexts and the connections across these contexts at any given time and across time" (Pianta, Rimm-Kauffman, & Cox, 1999). Kraft-Sayre and Pianta's "Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition" (see below) acknowledges the shared responsibilities of many individuals and institutions for the transition to elementary school. It also conveys the dynamic nature of the relationships between children, family, teachers, and community in preschool through kindergarten. Transition is recognized as a *process* that all these partners experience rather than an *event* that happens to a child.

The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition



Taken from Kraft-Sayre & Pianta (2000). *Enhancing the Transition to Kindergarten: Linking Children, Families & Schools.* Charlottesville, VA: National Center for Early Development & Learning, University of Virginia.

Transition Supports School Success

The literature on early intervention provides a strong rationale for the importance of continuity in the transition from early childhood to school age settings. Early intervention research suggests that participants' early gains, especially cognitive gains, fade as they move through primary grades (Shore, 1998). This drop-off may be attributed, at least in part, to dramatic differences between parent involvement, classroom organization, and teaching style in early care and education programs and in elementary schools (O'Brien, 1991). Children often have difficulty adjusting to classrooms where the rules, routines,

atmosphere, or philosophy may differ dramatically from preschool and child care settings (Shore, 1998).

Results of the National Head Start Demonstration evaluation also suggest that local commitments to effective transition demonstrated at local sites appear to combat the "fade-out effect" with respect to student achievement. While children in the demonstration entered school below national averages in reading, between the fall of kindergarten and the spring of first grades, scores in reading rose rapidly up to near national average.[2]

A body of evidence is building that underscores the importance of creating transitional mechanisms and practices in order to sustain and build on children's social, emotional, and academic competencies. Early intervention cannot be viewed as an "inoculation" that ensures continued school success (Ramey & Ramey, 1999). As Ramey and Ramey's findings from the Abecedarian Project indicate, children who received additional environmental support as they moved into and through kindergarten and the early elementary grades performed better in reading and math.[3]

"Promising Practices" in the Transition to Kindergarten

It should be noted that while developing more effective transitions to establish continuity for children is strongly supported in the literature described above, there is little consensus on exactly *how* to go about it. While a substantial body of literature is emerging about continuity and the importance of transition practices in general, few studies have been conducted that link specific "best practices" to positive child outcomes (Education Commission of the States, 2000). This is, in part, attributed to the context-specific, i.e., ecological, nature of transition practice.

As Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000) suggest, "school transition is not a 'one size fits all' program." Transition practices across the country range from low or no-cost efforts initiated at the local level to full-scale statewide initiatives that are part of larger educational reform efforts. What "works" in one community may not be effective in another. Therefore, we have chosen to frame this section in terms of "promising" practices rather than "best" practices in an effort to underscore the dynamic and ecological nature of transition.

Transition practices are implemented by a range of partners, in a variety of settings, and in multiple domains of continuity. While we recognize the importance of curriculum and training, assessment, administrative, and other practices as crucial to ensuring successful transition, we now turn our focus to promising transition practices in the domain of family involvement.

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[2] Drawn from comments made by Ramey and Ramey at the 2000 Head Start National Research Conference. The evaluation report on the National Head Start Transition Demonstration is to be released later this summer.

[3] A cost-benefit analysis of Abecedarian Project results is to be conducted in the near future.

As a preface to the next section, however, we need to articulate three important points about the promising practices literature:

- First, we recognize that children enter kindergarten from a variety of early care and education settings, including child care centers, family day care, preschools, and Head Start programs. However, less is known about the transition from child care and family day care settings to kindergarten. Therefore, for this brief, we have chosen to focus on the promising practices based on evidence collected on the transition from preschools and Head Start programs, to kindergarten. For brevity, these settings are referred to as "preschool" settings.

- Second, a preponderance of the research on transition to kindergarten is written from the perspective of how schools contribute to successful transitions. Therefore, most of the promising practices that emerge from the literature are currently being implemented by schools, although could be implemented by other settings as well.

- Finally, according to a recent study released by the National Academy of Sciences,

  > "Striking disparities in what children know and can do are evident well before they enter kindergarten. These differences are strongly associated with social and economic circumstances and they are predictive of subsequent academic performance" (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 5).

Therefore, it is important to be mindful that school readiness initiatives, and the promising transition practices that accompany them, should be judged not only in terms of how they improve academic performance, but also by how well they "level the field" so that disparities among children of diverse social and economic backgrounds are reduced.

Promising Practices That Involve Families in the Transition to Kindergarten

One hallmark of a quality early care and education setting is the degree to which it involves families. But research indicates that family involvement needs to continue beyond the preschool years. Studies indicate that when parents are involved in their children's schooling, children achieve higher grades and better school attendance, they have more positive attitudes and behaviors, higher graduation rates, and greater enrollment in higher education (Henderson & Berla, 1994).

Turning to the literature on transition practices, it seems that family involvement, albeit in its most basic form, is already a well-established transition mechanism. In a recent

national survey of transition practices,[4] an overwhelming 95% of kindergarten teachers in the sample cited talking to parents after school starts as a key transition strategy (Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). That study also revealed that the most frequently endorsed transition practices are those that take place after the start of school, and/or involve low-intensity, generic contact (flyers, brochures, open houses) with families.

While these certainly are valid techniques for involving families in their children's schooling, transition research suggests that schools need to take a more proactive approach to involving and engaging families prior to the start of school. Specifically, Pianta et. al. (1999) suggest that schools need to base transition practices on three inter-related principles:

1. *Reaching out.* Schools reach out and link with families and preschools in order to establish relationships and engage in two-way communication about how to establish effective transition practices.

2. *Reaching backward in time.* Schools establish links particularly with families before the first day of school.

3. *Reaching with appropriate intensity.* Schools develop a range of practices with varying intensity (i.e., low intensity-flyers or pamphlets, high intensity-personal contacts or home visits).

Further, transition activities implemented prior to kindergarten entry must be sustained once the child enters school in order to ensure continuity. This is especially critical in the domain of family involvement where research shows a decline in family-school partnerships across the grades (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997).

Home-school connections are crucial to the transition to kindergarten, yet research indicates that, compared to early child care and education professionals, elementary school professionals are less trained in family involvement. Recent research conducted by HFRP points to the important role that teacher education programs can have in the promotion of family involvement (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). Ongoing professional development programs can complement pre-service training to facilitate kindergarten transition by working with current teachers to improve transition practice.[5]

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[4] This national study of transition practices is based on a sample of 3,595 kindergarten teachers nationwide. Teachers were asked about their use of 21 practices related to the transition of children to kindergarten in the 1996-97 academic year and 15 barriers to implementing transition practices.

[5] For example, HFRP has recently launched the Family Involvement Network of Educators to provide in-service training to professionals interested in improving their practice around family involvement.

While specific approaches vary across communities, some promising practices to "reach out" and "reach back" to families beyond talking to parents once their child enters kindergarten are listed below and summarized in Table 1.[6]

- *Periodic contact with families of preschoolers*, either via a telephone call or face-to-face, to begin sharing information about the child and their routines, and their school setting
- *Periodic contact with the children themselves* to begin to develop a relationship prior to school entry
- *Invitations to visit the kindergarten* in the spring of the child's preschool year[7]
- *Preparation and dissemination of home-learning activities*, including providing summer booklists and other literacy activities for the summer months prior to kindergarten entry
- *Family meetings* prior to the onset of kindergarten to discuss teacher expectations
- *Partner with local parent-teacher association* to inform parents how they can be involved in their child's kindergarten setting and connect new families with families currently enrolled in the school
- *Dissemination of information to parents* on the transition to kindergarten, including kindergarten registration guidelines, kindergarten options in the community, information on specific schools once placements have been made, and health and nutrition information to ensure that children enter school healthy
- *Home visits* before and after children enter kindergarten
- *Support groups* for parents as their children transition to kindergarten
- *Facilitate early registration* for kindergarten so that families have time to prepare children for their new setting and so specific teachers can "reach back" to their prospective students well before the first day of school
- In areas with a large percentage of limited English proficiency families, *staff early care and education and kindergartens with bilingual teacher aides*

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[6] This list is a synthesis of practices developed by Child Trends, 2000, Education Commission of the State, 2000, Kraft-Sayre and Pianta, 2000, Pianta, et. al., 1999, Shore, 1998.

[7] This practice is best accomplished when kindergarten class lists can be generated well in advance of the first day of school.

Table 1:
Summary of Promising Practices to Involve Families in Transition to Kindergarten

Transition Practices	Core Partners
• Contact with preschool families • Contact with preschool children • Kindergarten visits • Home learning activities • Informational meetings • Partner with local PTAs • Information dissemination • Home visits • Parent support groups • Maintain informal contact with preschool "graduates" • Facilitate early registration • Staff ECE and kindergarten with bilingual teacher aides as needed	• School personnel (teachers, principals, superintendents) • Parents and children • Preschools/Head Start personnel • Community groups

Many programs across the country already use some of these promising practices to involve families in their children's transition to kindergarten. Below are three examples that illustrate "reaching back," creating community partners, and engaging bilingual staff.

Countdown to Kindergarten is a year-long, citywide effort to help families of children with preschoolers to prepare for kindergarten. Starting in September, and continuing every month until children enter kindergarten in 2001, parents of kindergarten-age children in the city of Boston will receive registration information, calls from school parent volunteers, and written information on strategies to enhance child learning at home. Kindergarten registration will begin in January 2001 so that placements can be made by March, thus allowing plenty of time for families to prepare their children for specific class assignments. While many communities contact parents the summer before kindergarten begins, this citywide program is unique because it "reaches back" to start a full year prior to kindergarten entry (Vaishnav, 2000).

Continuity for Success is a joint partnership between the National Parent Teachers Association (NPTA) and the National Head Start Association (NHSA). Its primary goal is to support and increase parent involvement in the transition from Head Start programs to public elementary schools by developing national and local partnerships between the associations. The Continuity for Success Transition Planning Guide offers a step-by-step approach to building community partnerships, as well as how to develop an action plan.[8]

[8] For further information on Continuity for Success, visit the website at: http://www.pta.org/programs/cfs/partner.htm.

> **Okeechobee County, Florida**, which serves a large migrant population, pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, staffs its classrooms with bilingual teacher aides to help children and families with limited English proficiency make the transition to school. Additionally, the school employs a migrant advocate to help families link to necessary health and social services (National Educators Association, 1998).

While the above examples illustrate how *schools* are engaging families in transition, a few studies (see, for example, Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1995) have investigated school transition from the perspective of *early care and education programs*. Below is an example from this perspective.

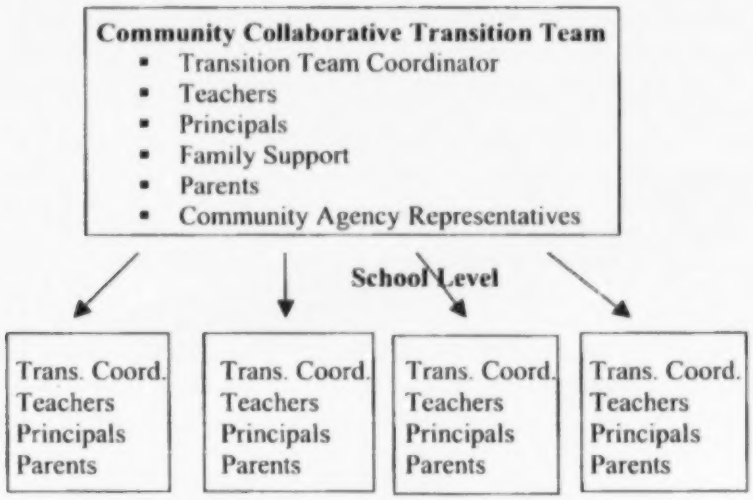
> **The Family and Child Education program sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs** offers early childhood education and family support to Native Americans. It has two major components: a home-based Parents as Teachers program and a center-based family literacy program (Even Start). The center-based component of this program uses the High/Scope curriculum and training on this curriculum is provided in some sites to kindergarten and primary grade teachers as well. This program is a joint collaboration with the Parents as Teachers National Center, the National Center for Literacy, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Schultz, Lopez, & Hochberg, 1995).

Not surprisingly, the promising practices that schools implement to "reach back" to children and families are similar to those used by early care and education programs. Additionally, *many early care and education programs continue informal contact with families after their children leave the program*. These early family connections can be a valuable resource for families dealing with school issues.

Engaging families in the transition to kindergarten can be a complex and difficult task. The promising practices presented above can help programs think about the best way to engage families, given the context of their school. Regardless of context, however, a promising first step in beginning to think about families as transition partners is to *identify a transition coordinator* within your local school; this person can serve as a bridge to work with families making the transition from preschool to kindergarten.

Kraft-Sayre and Pianta (2000) have developed a theoretical framework for the development of **"school and program transition teams"** that include a transition coordinator. These collaborative teams include preschool teachers, kindergarten teachers, family workers, principals, parents, and other community representatives. The model below illustrates how the teams are developed at the community/school district level and at the level of specific schools.

District/Community Level



This framework recognizes the important contributions that families can make in their children's transition to kindergarten and makes them part of the transition team.

Conclusion

From our review of promising transition practices, we conclude that family involvement should be an integral part of transition policies and programs that are developed. The research on the benefits of involving families in their children's education indicates that families are a critical partner in providing continuity as children move between systems of care and education. The degree to which families are involved in their child's educational experiences appears to be based on the attitudes of teachers toward that involvement. In turn, teachers' attitudes and behaviors can be strongly influenced by the attitudes of their supervisors. Therefore, strong leadership in establishing transition policies and practices that contain family involvement components and conveying these to teachers and families is of paramount importance to effective transition. Teacher training should include a family involvement component and should extend from the preschool and child care systems through to elementary school. Finally, the development of a school and program transition team can facilitate successful school transition for children and families alike. Working together, these teams, that include parents, can ensure that family members become active and lifelong participants throughout their child's school transitions.

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